

## **What divides and unifies Chinese Christians?**

What divides and unifies Chinese Christians? Understanding the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in China Michel Chambon China January 21, 2016

Jan. 18 marked the start of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity promoted by both the World Council of Churches in Geneva and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in Rome.

What does it hold for churches and Christian communities developing in China? A look at the past and current situation will help us better understand issues about Christian unity.

According to the Chinese Constitution, there are only two major Christian churches in China: the Protestant Church (jidujiao) and the Catholic Church (tianzhujiao).

However, the real situation is more subtle than this legal framework suggests.

As we know, excesses from the Maoist era followed by the invasive policy of the post-1979 era led Catholics and Protestants to divide themselves between "legally registered churches" and "nonregistered churches" (underground communities for Catholics, house churches for Protestants).

But the political factor is still not the sole explanation for all the fractures and differentiations within this rich and vivid Chinese Christianity.

### **The weight of history**

One major factor to consider is history. Neither the efforts of churches nor those of the Communist Party managed to erase divisions that marked Catholics and Protestants of pre-1949 China.

On the Protestant side, various denominations and major Protestant countries were committed to conquering and implanting their own religious tradition in the Middle Kingdom.

On the Catholic side, the situation is similar in many ways. The competition between Catholic nations and between major religious orders created a very fragmented pre-1949 Catholic sphere in China.

Despite attempts by the Holy See to standardize the ecclesiastical administration of the country, divisions between territories and spiritual traditions remained vivid until the arrival of the Communists.

This legacy explains why some contemporary Catholic groups refuse to belong to the local diocese because they claim a different historical affiliation.



*Chinese Catholics praying at a Christmas Eve Mass in Beijing. (AFP photo)*

### **Resentment against semicolonization**

The weight of history is also felt vis-a-vis the aftermath of the semicolonialization that China has endured. Various alliances between Western Christians and gunboat diplomacy that marked the 19th and the early 20th century have in the Chinese mind linked Christianity to colonialism.

The Boxer Uprising between 1899 and 1901 reflects the burning problem of the last century. Thus, from the 1910s-1920s, Catholic and Protestant circles improvised answers to this anti-Western resentment.

On the Catholic side, the church tried to promote the ordination of indigenous bishops to make the church more Chinese, even though diocesan resources and power fell under the struggles of local clans and ethnic groups.

On the Protestant side, various Chinese preachers created new churches free from foreign supervision in different regions of the country.

Finally, it is worth noting that present resentment against Western semicolonization still explains the caution with which some Chinese Christians approach the current ecumenical movement.

This movement, advocated by major international churches, is sometimes perceived as nothing more than a new strategy of subjugation by foreigners.

In addition, there are other elements that tear up the only coat of Christ in China.

### **Socioeconomic changes**

The first element is the recent major socioeconomic change. Indeed, the enormous economic growth since 1979 has led millions of Chinese out of their village to reach large cities. This impacts churches as well.

For example, the diffused discrimination that Cantonese people broadcast against newcomers who do not speak Cantonese (or Mandarin with a proper local accent) is such that it is found even inside Christian communities.

Anyone who visits underground and official Catholics in Guangzhou will be surprised to note how the geographical origin largely explains the distinction between these two communities and their two clergies.

Thus, we should not ignore that economic migration and latent xenophobia feed a real fragmentation of Chinese Christian communities.

Another dividing factor is the religio-cultural context of Chinese civilization. This traditional background is characterized among other things by a deep respect toward ancient sacred scriptures and a push for empowerment of local cults honoring a multitude of gods.

### **Role of pseudo-Christian sects**

Therefore, this context produces a constant emergence of new local sects that appropriate parts of the Bible while simultaneously changing the Christian faith and claiming a Christian identity. In the long and ever-growing list of these sects, the most famous is the "Eastern Lightning."

Founded in the 1990s in Heilongjiang province around the female reincarnation of Jesus, followers of these sects are predicting an imminent end of the world while providing multiple healing rituals.

These religious groups recruit among Chinese Protestant networks by proselytizing at the door of mainstream churches.

Thus, constant multiplication and spread of these pseudo-Christian sects blur the Chinese Christian landscape and prohibit ecumenical dialogue from any in-depth development.

A final factor is the sometimes ambiguous impact of the international opening of the country.

Although this post-1979 opening has globally favored the ecumenical movement by allowing Chinese churches to engage with international Christian networks and to discover other traditions and practices, some foreign missionaries coming to China are frontally opposed to ecumenism and actively influence Chinese Christians.

For instance, many Korean missionaries (mostly Protestants, but also Catholics) who are marked by their own national context refrain churches in northeast China from opening themselves to other Christian traditions and practices.

Yet the Christian galaxy in China is not only a fragmented and diverging one.

### **Ecumenism is alive**

Ecumenism is not condemned to disappear from China. Indeed, we can find within the Chinese society and among Chinese Christians a certain number of mediations infusing a path of mutual respect, convergence and relative spiritual communion.

All Protestants share the same Chinese vocabulary to name God, Biblical people and notions of faith. However, Catholics and Protestants often do not.

Similarly, a certain number of liturgical hymns are found within different Christian traditions and communities. In one city where I conduct research, the same person is employed by all local Christians to organize funerals.

This person is recognized and accepted by all Christians and declines to serve non-Christian families. All these examples show that there is indeed a real practical ecumenism in China.

Another indirect inducement to ecumenism is that political pressure on Christian groups has created a "communion of misfortune." Chinese Christians share a common history that binds them together and breathes a spirit of mutual respect.

Although these groups do not work together, they come together through religio-political structures that the government has put in place to manage them.

In practice, pastors and Christian leaders meet regularly in joint training sessions organized by the Chinese administration.

At the risk of being paradoxical, we must note that the Chinese Communist Party is not only a factor of Christian division but also a factor of mutual knowledge and basic communion.

Thus, because of the history and political context, relations between churches in China are quite cordial and friendly.

## **Churches perceived as interrelated**

Finally, it is interesting to note that within the overall Chinese population the xinyesu, or "believers in Jesus" are perceived as a very distinctive group compared to the info or "believers in Buddha" (the term Buddha here actually refers to all the gods that China can count).

It seems that the main dividing religious line in China which was traditionally between Confucians and religious people (Buddhists and Taoists) is moving toward a binary dichotomy between Christians and "Buddhists."

In this context, Christian churches are perceived by the majority of the Chinese population as a whole, more or less homogeneous but clearly interrelated. This popular perception pushes Christians to develop on their own an even stronger family spirit.

In conclusion, we see that the ecumenical situation in China reflects strengths and weaknesses, intricacies and difficulties.

Although the so-called "Week of Prayer for Christian Unity" hardly attracts any interest from Chinese Catholics and Protestants (the China Christian Council is a member of the World Council of Churches), Chinese Christians are all aware of sharing the same spiritual filiation and of their duty to better honor Jesus' prayer for his disciples: "they may be one so that the world may believe."

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